The Icelanders on Washington Island /

THE ICELANDERS ON WASHINGTON ISLAND. BY HARRY K. WHITE

It is not generally known that Washington Island, which comprises the most northern town of Door county, is the home of about 115 Icelanders. The little group is well worthy of consideration, because so few Americans have come in contact with any of this nationality. William Wickmann1 says that they are the first Icelanders known to have come here since the days of Leif Ericson. The census of 1860 gives ten natives of Iceland in the United States, but it is difficult to determine whether some of these were not born in Iceland while their parents were temporarily there. We can best understand the Icelanders of Wisconsin by a study of their ancestry, and the conditions under which they have developed.

1 William Wickmann, now a real-estate dealer in Chicago, is by birth a Dane. In 1864 he was sent to Iceland by the Danish government, and remained there several years. He then came to Milwaukee, and was instrumental in inaugurating the Icelandic immigration to America. It is to him that I am indebted for most of the facts concerning the early Icelandic immigration. His letter is filed with the Wisconsin Historical Society.

When one speaks of Iceland, the name, and the fact that the island reaches north to the Arctic circle, at once suggest to our minds people living in small snow huts, clothing themselves in the skins of animals which they have killed and whose flesh they have eaten —unless we recall something of the history of the island, or remember that the gulf stream modifies the climate, especially of the southern portion, to a considerable degree.

The real colonization of Iceland dates back to the ninth 336 century (874). Many of the proud Norwegian chiefs refused to submit to the rule of King Harold Fair-hair, and they objected still more to obeying Harold's successor and exchanging paganism for Christianity. The majority of the wealthiest and most intelligent of these settled in Iceland.

Christianity was soon introduced into that island, and the republic there founded (930) lasted until the thirteenth century. During this time, being undisturbed, they acquired a love of independence, an attachment to their homes and to the arts of peace, that the centuries of war and oppression which followed subdued but never annihilated. During this time, their literature was not forgotten, and their children were given a good education in the homes, if there were no schools. During the past century, as the Danes have gradually given back to them many of their old liberties, their love of learning has been given a new impetus, and they have, in a measure, returned to their old manner of life. But the severity of the climate, the difficulty of earning a livelihood, the fact that the long winters necessitate idleness during a large portion of the year, and the oppression of the Danish government, all have combined to crush out much of the enterprise and daring of their Norse ancestors, and to leave them an intelligent, active, frugal, simple, peace-loving people.

Iceland has little fertile land, as the entire interior consists of a plateau covered with rocks and lava beds. There are a few valleys extending toward the interior, back from the bays. Large portions of these valleys are covered with marshes which would be very productive if properly drained. Some of the remainder is sandy, and the rest is good grass land. Only about 215 acres are under cultivation, and they are planted with garden vegetables, such as cabbages, turnips, lettuce, and a few potatoes. The summers are too short to raise grain. The climate is gradually growing colder, owing to the increasing amount of drift-ice being brought from Greenland. Centuries ago, several varieties of grain were grown there. There are still traces of ancient forests, in the form of semi-carbonized 337 wood, which is occasionally used as fuel or for the manufacture of articles of furniture. The people do all their travelling on small, tough horses, well adapted to the country. Some of the farmers live almost 400 miles from a market. Once a year they pack their tallow, wool, and hides upon horses and go to market, where they exchange their produce for coffee, sugar, liquor, tobacco, salt, and perhaps a little flour; but the latter is a luxury very little indulged

in, except by the relatively rich. An idea of how little flour is used, is shown by the fact that in 1855 they used one-half as many barrels of salt as of all kinds of grain.

The foregoing sketch of the condition of affairs in Iceland, plainly shows the reason why these people, with a somewhat high standard of life, should be willing to leave their homes and native land, to which they are so much attached, to make for themselves abiding places in the new world.

The first emigration of Icelanders was made through the influence of Guden Thorgoimsen, who received a thorough education in Denmark, and returned to Iceland to try to improve the condition of his people. He reorganized their schools, paying many of the teachers from his own means. But he soon began to realize how hopeless was his task. About 1870 (the exact dates are not at hand), he began a correspondence with William Wickmann, who has already been referred to; Wickmann was then living at Milwaukee. The result was, that about 1872. Thorgoimsen sent out four young men. Wickmann, knowing that an Icelander would feel more at home if he were close to a body of water where he could procure plenty of fish, and be somewhat remote from the bustle and noise that is characteristic of American life, decided to take these men to Washington Island. Within a year, quite a large number arrived. Wickmann taught them to cut timber and build houses, and furnished them with fish-nets, and provisions enough to last them until they could get some for themselves. 22

338

Many Danes had already settled on the island, but the two nationalities lived together on the best of terms. At first some of the Icelanders were disappointed, and, had they been able, would have returned. But before they had obtained the means to do so, they had adapted themselves to the changed conditions and grown contented. For some years they spent the greater part of the time in fishing; but, as fish began to get scarce, they fell to tilling the soil, cutting timber, and building vessels, of which sixteen are owned on the island. Several of these vessels are engaged in carrying away the lumber and shingles

that are manufactured. At present, the Icelanders are quite thoroughly scattered over the island, and, although they form less than a sixth of the entire population, and readily adopt ideas and methods that are an improvement on their own, their influence is easily discernible.

In religion they are Lutherans, and appear not at all inclined to return to the Roman Catholic faith, which the Danes, on conquering Iceland, compelled them to abandon. Few of them are intensely religious, and there is a strong tendency to separate from the Lutheran denomination, for they seem to feel at home in any Protestant church. In Iceland, the state supports the churches, and the people are not able to subscribe much to religious work, even were they inclined to do so. Interested observers declare that it will take some time for them to get into the habit of giving liberally to the support of religious services. They have several churches on the island, but, as a rule, they are not well supported.

The language of these people is the old Norse, or old Norwegian, and is cited as the oldest living language of the Teutonic family.1 The reason why no dialects have sprung up to change the language, is that, in Iceland, there have

1 *Amer. Cyclopœdia*, ix, p. 151. In Johnson's *Universal Cyclopœdia* (1894), iv, p. 475, Dr. Rasmus B. Anderson, an acknowledged authority, says: “The Icelanders belong exclusively to the Scandinavian branch of the Teutonic race, and their religion is the Evangelical Lutheran.”

339 been neither church using a foreign language, social or industrial classes, nor distinct town life. There is so little difference in what the different families produce, that there is no exchange carried on except for imported goods.

The *Encylopœdia Britannica* (vol. xii, p. 619) states that “The Icelanders have long been famous for their education and learning, and it is no exaggeration to say that in no other country is such an amount of information found among the classes that occupy a similar

position. A child of ten unable to read, is not to be found from one end of the island to the other. A peasant understanding several languages, is no rarity." Those living on Washington Island are no exception to this rule, except that the advantages of our public school system are so much greater than those of the schools of Iceland, that the children are going farther than their parents did. Teachers of their schools say that the Icelandic children learn more easily than the children of either the Danes, the Norwegians, the Swedes, the English, or the Irish. So far as I know, none of them have entered our higher institutions of learning, for their isolation tends to keep them ignorant of the advantages offered by these.

The people are sociable; but, so far as I can learn, they prefer quiet conversation, and games like chess and checkers, that require some thought, to exciting games, dancing, and the like. They are fond of singing hymns; Mr. Wickmann says that during his whole stay in Iceland, he never heard the people sing anything but these. A literary society furnishes entertainment to the people of the island.

While in Iceland they were neither indolent nor lacking in thrift, their opportunities were so limited that it seemed almost useless to try to better their condition; but with the inducements which their new conditions offer, they have become much more industrious, and will not long be inferior to the Americans in push and enterprise.

They are the most kind-hearted and hospitable people that one can meet, and are always ready to help any one 340 in need. Indeed, in Iceland, relief is granted so readily that there is an unusually large class dependent on public charity, who are really able to support themselves.

There are neither saloons nor lawyers on the island. The people are such peaceable citizens that a lawyer there would find little to do. Most of them drink liquor occasionally at their homes, but they will not allow a saloon in their midst.

It is not the intention of this sketch to convey the impression that the Icelanders are responsible for all the conditions that exist on Washington Island; but that, as a class, they stand on the side of morality, intelligence, law, peace, and justice.

Bishop Jön Bjarnason of Winnipeg, Manitoba,1 has kindly furnished the following estimates of the number of Icelanders now in the New World, all of whom have immigrated since the four men whom Wickmann brought out. The largest settlement in America is in the Red River district, part being in Pembina county, North Dakota, and the remainder in Gimli (“Paradise”) county, Manitoba, on the western shore of Lake Winnipeg; these settlements jointly contain six to eight thousand Icelanders. There are other settlements of considerable importance in Minnesota (near Marshall), in the northern part of Manitoba, in Ontario, and in Nova Scotia; and there is one in Brazil. The bishop does not give an estimate of the number of Icelanders, except in the first-named settlements; but, as each of the others named are of considerable importance, it seems that ten thousand is a low estimate of all the Icelanders who have immigrated to the New World in the last two decades. This is a large proportion to the entire population of Iceland, which by the census of 1888 was 69,224.

1 He was formerly a clergyman in Reykjarik. In 1874–75, he was a professor in Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, and is now bishop of the Icelandic Lutheran Church, in Canada. For a time, he was engaged in literary collaboration with Dr. Rasmus B. Anderson, of Madison, Wis.